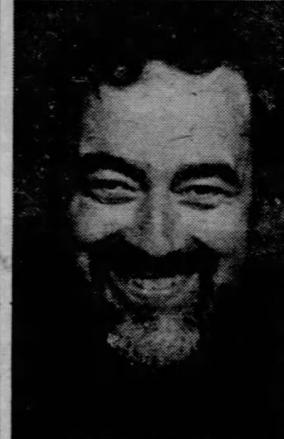


Make 'Room' For Levin's New 'Baby'

By PATRICIA O'HAIRE

Ira Levin is a big man with black hair and a greying beard, and he seems to like to laugh. He gave out with a big, hearty laugh the other afternoon when someone asked him how he got hooked on the supernatural — a natural enough question, everything considered.

Levin is the author of "Rosemary's Baby," the chilling tale of witchcraft as practiced in an apartment building right here in



Ira Levin

this big city. Now he's written a play called "Veronica's Room," and it's also a thriller. It just opened at the Music Box Theater and it, too, is about very strange, spooky and possibly supernatural things that happen when an elderly couple, played by Arthur Kennedy and Eileen Heckart, invite a younger couple, Regina Baff and Kipp Osborne, into their home.

But back to the question that made Ira Levin laugh and then answer it seriously. "I've never had any real involvement with the occult," he explained, "unless, of course, you want to count the letters I got after 'Rosemary's Baby' was published. There were some really strange ones then, I must say. And mostly from women," at which point he paused as if he was surprised at the memory. "Mainly they wanted to know where they could get some more information about witchcraft. I couldn't even help them."

Well, maybe Levin doesn't know any witches, but somebody is certainly casting a whole bunch of good spells on him. Consider

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his record since 1950, when he was a senior at NYU and first tasted writing success by being runner-up in a script contest sponsored by CBS-TV. After he finished school, he sold a script to NBC, and began writing half-hour TV shows for programs like *Lights Out* and *The Clock*. Between shows, he spent his time working on a mystery novel, "A Kiss Before Dying," but was drafted before it was published. But once it was, it won the Edgar Allan Poe award for the best first mystery of its year, and later it was made into a movie.

In the Army, he wrote training films, and between films, he kept busy writing more TV scripts. One of these was an adaptation of Mac Hyman's novel, "No Time for Sergeants," which Levin later did for the stage and scored another hit. Later, it was made into a successful movie and then into a successful TV series.

After that, a slight letdown with a play called "Interlock," which he claims was distinguished only by the fact that it introduced Maximilian Schell to Broadway (for four performances only). Next "Critics' Choice," a comedy which starred Henry Fonda on Broadway and Bob Hope in a movie version, and then it was 1962. That was the year Levin remembers fondly as the year he wrote "General Seeger," a drama which he recalls, "George C. Scott produced, directed, starred in and pushed Levin down a flight of stairs during the out-of-town tryout."

Still he kept on. His next was "Drat, the Bat," a near-miss musical, followed by the highly successful "Rosemary's Baby." Then two novels, a futuristic science-fiction called "This Perfect Day" and "The Stepford Wives." And now, the new play.

Listen to Levin on "Veronica's Room": "I had given up writing plays, but I got an idea for this one and right away I started working it out. It almost wrote itself. I just kept at it and at it, and finally finished it one Tuesday morning last winter. I sent it to my agent and he sent it to Morton Gottlieb, our first choice as producer, and within 48 hours, he optioned it. That's when it all began falling into place.

"Eileen Heckart called the day after she got the script and agreed to do it. Arthur Kennedy took two days, but he was up in Nova Scotia, or thereabouts. Then we got the theater we wanted and the set designer we wanted," he said, looking dreamily off somewhere.

Well, anyone who'd bet against a record like that deserves to have a hex put on them, right? Right.

Drama